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Is a Military Man Best for the CIA?

President Carter's nomination of Adm. Stansfield Turner to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency is likely to have smoother sailing in the Senate than the President's original choice for the top intelligence post.

Theodore C. Sorensen withdrew under a barrage of fire from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence — not because he wasn't qualified for the CIA directorship, but because he realized a prolonged confirmation battle would handicap both the new administration as well as his own effectiveness if he was confirmed.

We assume that Adm. Turner, who is commander of Allied forces in Southern Europe, will have an easier time than Mr. Sorensen because of the fact that he is a military man. If he is confirmed, he will be the 10th CIA director since the agency was established in 1947, and the fourth who has been a military officer.

Adm. Turner's military background is impressive. We do not imply that this background is a barrier to effective service as CIA chief. What we do point out, however, is that the chief function of the Central Intelligence director is to furnish the President and the government with intelligence information that is objective and that transcends military rivalries in the Pentagon.

Presumably, this independence from

the military was one of the qualifications that Mr. Carter found attractive in Mr. Sorensen. Although the latter is well-versed in both government and politics, he had no previous ties to the CIA. Perhaps this was one of the things that the Senate Intelligence Committee found objectionable.

At any rate, Jimmy Carter chose not to fight for Ted Sorensen's nomination — perhaps because he did not want to risk a confirmation defeat at the beginning of his presidency.

The Senate is expected to take its time reviewing the admiral's qualifications because he is not well-known on Capitol Hill. But he comes well recommended by the President who declared, "I have never known a better military person." The two men were classmates at the U.S. Naval Academy, although they didn't know each other at the time. The admiral came to the Navy via the Naval Reserve at Amherst College, he was a Rhodes scholar; he served in both the Korean and Vietnam wars; and he was president of the Naval College.

Indeed, the President's warm praise for his CIA nominee appears deserved. But the question the Senate must answer is whether Adm. Turner will perform with equal distinction in the highly sensitive job of director of U.S. intelligence. The Senate, which was unwilling to entrust Mr. Sorensen with this responsibility, should be as demanding in making up its mind about Adm. Turner.